



County Council

Minutes of the meeting held at County Hall, Colliton Park, Dorchester,
DT1 1XJ on Thursday, 10 March 2016.

Present:

John Wilson (Chairman)

Andrew Cattaway (Vice-Chairman)

Pauline Batstone, Michael Bevan, Steve Butler, Andy Canning, Ronald Coatsworth, Robin Cook, Toni Coombs, Barrie Cooper, Hilary Cox, Deborah Croney, Lesley Dedman, Janet Dover, Fred Drane, Beryl Ezzard, Peter Finney, Ian Gardner, Robert Gould, Peter Hall, David Harris, Jill Haynes, Susan Jefferies, David Jones, Trevor Jones, Ros Kayes, Paul Kimber, Rebecca Knox, Mike Lovell, David Mannings, Margaret Phipps, Peter Richardson, Ian Smith, Clare Sutton, Mark Tewkesbury, William Trite, Daryl Turner, Peter Wharf and Kate Wheller.

Officers Attending: Debbie Ward (Chief Executive), Nicky Cleave (Deputy Director of Public Health), Catherine Driscoll (Director for Adult and Community Services), Patrick Ellis (Assistant Chief Executive), Jonathan Mair (Monitoring Officer), Jim McManus (Chief Accountant), Patrick Myers (Head of Corporate Development), Matthew Piles (Head of Economy), Lee Gallagher (Democratic Services Manager) and Helen Whitby (Principal Democratic Services Officer).

(Note: These minutes have been prepared by officers as a record of the meeting and of any decisions reached. They are to be considered and confirmed at the next meeting of the County Council to be held on **Thursday, 21 April 2016.**)

Apologies for Absence

31 Apologies for absence were received from Richard Biggs, Mike Byatt, Spencer Flower, Mervyn Jeffery, Colin Jamieson and David Walsh.

Code of Conduct

32 There were no declarations by members of disclosable pecuniary interests under the Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer clarified that membership of district and borough councils across Dorset did not qualify in the Code of Conduct as a disclosable pecuniary interest and that all dual members could remain in the Chamber and take part in the discussion in relation to the future options for Local Government in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole.

Exploring Options for the Future of Local Government in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole

33 The Council considered a report by the Chief Executive in relation to the future of local government in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. The meeting was arranged in response to a formal request from ten County Councillors (Peter Wharf, Paul Kimber, David Harris, William Trite, Steve Butler, Michael Bevan, Janet Dover, Mike Byatt, Daryl Turner and Trevor Jones). Updated Appendices to the report were circulated prior to the meeting.

The Chief Executive introduced the report and explained the rationale for the consideration of future options for Dorset, and that no decisions were being considered at this point. It was noted that the discussion would enable members to express views at an early stage on potential options based on guidance from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and based within

existing organisational boundaries. More detail would be presented to members in due course after the LGA's financial assessment had been analysed in early April 2016. It was further explained that a detailed financial assessment and a full business case would be required to progress any proposal to change the councils across Dorset, that this could be progressed, if there was an appetite to do so, within the challenging and ambitious timetable detailed within the report and could result in a new structure from 2019. All principal authorities in Dorset with the exception of East Dorset District Council were committed to exploring options for the whole of the County. Clarification was provided in relation to the recent formation of a combined authority between all councils in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole to focus on economic growth at a strategic level.

The Council noted that the key drivers for the exploration of options for the future were the need to provide the best services and outcomes possible for Dorset residents and the imperative to meet the financial challenge of all councils needing to save £100m collectively over the next four years. A further driver was the introduction of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 which brought a simplified process for exploring proposals to change structures through consensus of all parties, ideally within the optimum population size of 300-700k, but also allowed the Secretary of State power to impose change if necessary. If change was decided upon, there would be considerable consultation and engagement required with the public, communities, town and parish councils, staff and partners to explain the opportunities and risks of making changes to the ways councils operated. The Council's duty of care to its residents was also highlighted.

Members shared their views and concerns in relation to the proposals to remain with current structures or to explore options to become a unitary authority or authorities. Of those present 28 of 39 members took the opportunity to explain their views. The following themes emerged from the debate:

- (a) The majority of members recognised that in the current financial climate and with the scale of future funding reductions across all tiers, local government had to change. They also realised that if there was no consensus on the way forward, then Central Government would impose a solution. There was a recognition that any change to local government should be cost effective, provide the services that local communities wanted and needed, and that decision making should be at the lowest, appropriate level. The process for change should be open and transparent, and consultation and engagement with the public, partners and stakeholders would be crucial to its success. Members recognised that Dorset was often seen as lagging behind but the opportunity for change provided the Council with the means of shaping local government in Dorset rather than having a solution imposed. Any change would provide an opportunity to streamline work across the local government tiers.
- (b) With regard to the future shape of local governance, it was agreed that any future government arrangements should aim to reduce process, bureaucracy and management structures, that any change should strengthen and/or improve services, assist and support businesses and better meet communities' and/or residents' needs, and that decision making should be at the lowest appropriate level. Any future arrangements should be in the best interests of residents and the local area and provide economies of scale.
- (c) When considering unitary authorities, some members thought the possibility of having two unitary authorities across Dorset would provide a balance of power at a strategic level, be of similar sizes and better represent the rural and urban areas. Some thought a single Unitary would be too large and unwieldy. But it was highlighted that members of the public did not currently understand the

different functions and responsibilities of the different levels of local government in Dorset and that moving to one layer, would reduce the current lack of understanding. It was also recognised that unitary authorities would take decision making further from residents and reduce their representation at a time when services were also being cut.

- (d) It was recognised that the options presented had not been costed, no business cases had been developed to support them and any risks had not been fully assessed. Any agreed way forward would involve major organisational change which would itself involve risk. The organisation would need to have the necessary skills and expertise to take any identified option forward to make it successful and to ensure that it provided the expected outcomes.
- (e) The majority of members supported the devolvement of power to lower levels and saw an enhanced role for town and parish councils in the future. This would provide decision making closer to residents and potentially a better connection between residents, councillors and decision-makers and more local control. It was also recognised that town and parish councils better understood the needs of local residents and communities and any change might provide more effective democracy. It was highlighted that town and parish councils, including parish meetings, were of varying sizes, interests, and resources and that no assumptions should be made about their ability to take on these additional responsibilities.
- (f) All members recognised the importance of engagement with the public, partners and stakeholders on the way forward and that any responses should be given due consideration before a decision was taken about the future. Equally, it was recognised that there needed to be clarity about options being considered before any consultation took place.
- (g) There were many general comments made about the process; any change would necessitate a change in culture; unitary authorities would mean a reduction in the number of councillors across Dorset and a potential saving; councillors might provide a single point of reference for the public; a unitary authority would provide clarity for the public about what services were provided and by whom; recognition of the cost cutting benefits of change and the possibility of avoiding cuts to services in future; the possible additional cost of doing things at pace; and that any set back would also have a cost. The need to identify the right option for Dorset was recognised. However, some members thought that time should be taken to do this, whilst others thought the process should proceed at pace. Whatever the outcome, there was a need to ensure accountability.
- (h) With regard to devolved powers, particular attention was drawn to the Weymouth and Portland and Christchurch areas where there were no town or parish councils currently and a plea for them to be taken into account of in any future local government reorganisation.
- (i) In response to a question as to whether next year's County Council election would proceed, the Chief Executive explained that it was not possible to give a definitive answer at this point. The matter had been raised with the DCLG who confirmed that consideration could be given to a request to defer the election if it was sensible to do so, once a definite proposal was put forward.

The Council then received a presentation from the Head of Corporate Development which enabled members to express their preferences for each option within the report through an electronic voting system. It was clarified once more that this was not a

decision making process and was purely being used to gauge preferences at this stage. The outcome of the voting presented a clear preference for options 3 and 4. An outline of all of the results is attached to these minutes.

Officers were thanked for their efforts on the work to date.

The Leader of the Council summarised the outcome of the debate by clarifying that the quality of services underpinned any arrangements and that any powers and responsibilities needed to be exercised by the bodies as close to communities as possible with town and parish councils providing the building blocks with any new system. He highlighted that services needed to be delivered at the appropriate level including strategic decision making to make the most of devolution from government. The Leader then proposed the following amendment to recommendation two in the report to read:

'That the Chief Executive be authorised to undertake further work on options 3 and 4 of the report, and to report back to the next meeting of the Council with a view to developing a full business case, and public consultation programme.'

The amendment was seconded by Cllr David Harris. On being put to the vote the amendment was agreed unanimously.

Resolved

1. That the content of the Chief Executive's report be noted.
2. That the Chief Executive be authorised to undertake further work on options 3 and 4 of the report, and to report back to the next meeting of the Council with a view to developing a full business case, and public consultation programme.

Reason for Decisions

To ensure local government services were sustainable and residents, businesses and communities were supported by optimum local government arrangements.

Meeting Duration: 10.00 am - 12.20 pm